

Opening any newspaper, logging onto any social media or internet site, clicking on any television program---purporting to be ‘the news’ or not—and it is hard to escape the conclusion that we are a divided nation. Deeply divided. I can’t go along with others who suggest that we have never been more alienated—both the Civil War and the Revolutionary War eras spring to mind as worse times, in fact *much* worse—but the fact remains that no matter what the issue or event or crisis, we seem today to instantly choose up camps and start hurling invectives into each other’s ideological palisades.

So why is that? Why now? Not surprisingly, whenever I ask myself a question, I begin searching for the roots of an answer in the field of education. It’s what I do and it’s who I am. To put it at its basest level, if the only tool you have is a hammer, then every problem starts to look like a nail. It’s more than that, though. I look for answers in education because education is fundamental to the human condition. Any new or newly trending situation will often emanate from, at least in part, how we bring up the next generation.

American society is riven today more and more because we are no longer all working from the same playbook. Past generations had a more similar, a more shared common culture than we do today. There were certain experiences and understandings and assumptions that were so shared among us that sometimes their pervasiveness was so complete as to be unconscious, at least for most people. Our cultural underpinnings were so mutual that they were fully implicit, unnoticed like the fish so completely immersed in water that he isn’t even aware of it.

American education grew up with a number of shared purposes, including Christian belief and adherence to the political fundamentals of liberty and the democratic republic. As such, schools educated students, at least those who stuck with it long enough, in a literary canon sometimes referred to as the Great Books. These were the primary works in most important fields including literature which, when read and studied, shared with each new generation the ever-growing inheritance of Western Civilization. Like it or not, agree with its contents or not, when everybody read and studied a common set of books, everyone had a shared culture and a shared reference point on which to discuss the events and issues of the day.

This common canon, by the way, including both testaments of the Bible, and intellectual and political debates over the last several centuries rang with biblical references that streamlined arguments because everyone understood the point of them. The title of Adam Smith’s master stroke of capitalism, *The Wealth of Nations*, is biblical. As is the title of Harper Lee’s recently published prequel to *To Kill a Mockingbird*, *Go Set a Watchman*. Lincoln’s speeches are filled with biblical allegories. Bing Crosby, the greatest entertainer of all time in the entire universe and any other universe that might exist, offered biblical allusions in one of his very popular and very silly ditties, *Accentuate the Positive*. And in each case, everyone understood what was being said. The Bible, whether you believed and to what extent you believed, was a shared cultural work and it enhanced and speeded public discussions of issues. Though it was arguably the most important in the Western cultural canon, still, it was only one among many hundreds or even thousands of such works.

But that common canon was lost to education many decades ago and the culture suffered from it. It didn't, however, dissolve because other institutions grew up which provided a new shared culture. Think radio and television. When I grew up, we had basically 3 television stations to choose from. When my parents grew, they could tune in just a few radio stations. These then became the common cultural experiences of our generations.

Today, the different cultural camps don't listen to the same radio stations. They often don't read the same newspapers (though newspapers have a long tradition of representing different factions in America). Their television watching is being replaced by personal program selections made on the individual's, not the network's, schedule. There is so much to choose from on the internet that it is almost statistically impossible to share much of anything, unless the event is truly overwhelming or can cross every possible format.

What I would like to say, then, is that education must come to the rescue and return to teaching all students the same literary canon so that we can all start speaking the same language, referencing the same ideas, accepting the same understandings again, and thereby heal our culture and nation or at least congeal the worst of the bleeding. But I can't. The division has, in fact, become so deep, so elemental, that there is no way to really arrive at what such a canon of books would even be today. When people have tried to have that conversation, to select those books essential to our culture and our democracy, those involved have instantly chosen sides, separated into opposing camps, and begun hurling invectives into each other's ideological palisades.

To which I can respond with one of the few common allusions that most people in America still share: Good Grief.